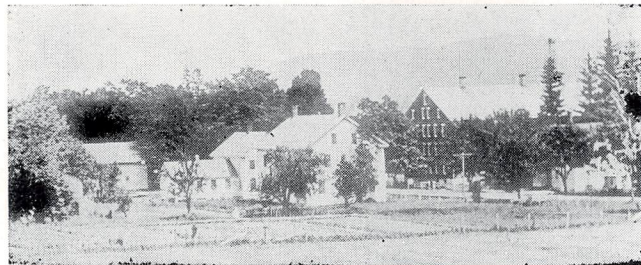


## The United Society of Believers (Shakers)

V. F. Beliajus



SHAKER VILLAGE - HANCOCK, MASS.

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The Shaker Sect or as they called themselves formally, the "United Society of Believers," was the first and only Christian group who were closest to the Jewish Essene sect to which Jesus belonged. They differed only in about seven points, otherwise, they were the truest followers of the Essenes (Essene is the Latinized form of "Ashai" Chaldean-Hebrew for "Baptists" or "Immersers.")

The seven racial differences between the two sects, Essene and Shakers were:

1. The dancing (hence the name given to them by the "non-believers"). The Essenes avoided any form that would lead them from the "straight and narrow." Even spiritual dancing would have been considered frivolous.

2. The Shakers were friendly tolerant and generous toward those who were not of their fold. The Essenes were bigots who had no use for anyone who did not believe in their manner. The Essenes, a communist group, could be compared to our present day Communists who are likewise rabid, hated in particular the two established religious political parties, the Pharisees and Sadukees (Saducees) who were by far superior in learning and intelligence to the Essenes. The Essenes would not eat together with the members of the other two parties nor wear clothes made by them. They waited near rivers and springs for converts to come to them. Jesus was the one to go to the people.

3. The Shakers, though they did believe in celibacy, permitted the same "privilege" for women. The Essenes avoided women. Jesus, again, was the first one to mix with women.

4. The Essenes observed the Sabbath with extreme rigidity—Shakers observed Sunday.

5. The most important holiday of the Essenes was the Passover, which afforded them communal meetings (The "Last Supper" for example). Shakers did not celebrate Passover at all.

6. Besides the Trinity the Shakers likewise believed in the "Duality of Christ" and that the second party of this duality was His "female nature" which became personified in the person of Mother Ann Lee, organizer of Shakerism. The Essenes would have never thought of such "privileges" for women.

7. The Essenes considered circumcision as an absolutely required statute in order to fulfill their covenant of Abraham with God.

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The most unusual phenomenon that took place the same time that Shakerism came into being, other sects of similar beliefs sprung into being in other parts of the world with none being aware of each other. (1) The Sabatians in Izmir (Smyrna) Turkey. Dancing and the "Female nature" of the Messiah were their principal traits. The "Female Nature" appeared in the person of Sarah, wife of their "prophet" Shabbetay Zevi. (2) The Frankists who came into being in Poland. Dancing and "Female Nature" of the Messiah in the person of Frank's daughter,

Eva. (3) The "Jumpers" of Wales. (4) The "Quakers" of England, though the Quakers did not actually dance, merely, due to over ecstasy. George Fox, organizer of the Society of Friends, was given to "writhe his body" and his disciples "aped very sincerely... and shook every limb the instant the fit of inspiration came upon them, whence they were called Quakers." (Quotes in this sentence taken from Voltaire in his "Letters on the English.") (5) The "Hassidim" of Poland—still in existence—dancing and singing was the essential part in their life, however, women were excluded of the religious dances.

The Shakers and the first three above mentioned groups and many Christian sects of that period had another thing in common—the "Millennial Age" where the "Second coming of Christ" among the Christian sects, and the coming of the Messiah in their person among the Sabatians and Frankists, who claimed to be the Messiahs.

The articles of faith of "Christian Virtues" which the Shakers faithfully adhered to (to their credit), were of lofty nature and consisted of: (1) Faith, (2) Hope, (3) Honesty, (4) Continence, (5) Innocence, (6) Simplicity, (7) Meekness, (8) Humility, (9) Patience, (10) Prudence, (11) Thankfulness, and (12) Charity.

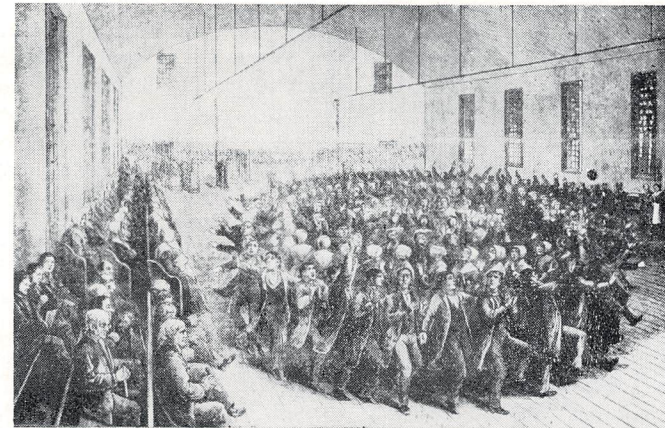
The Shakers observed fully the Essene injunction against swearing. The Essenes claimed that "He who cannot be believed without swearing is already condemned." Thus, "Yea" or "Nay" had to be accepted by the others, not belonging to these sects, in true confidence. Simplicity in dress and pacifism were their other characteristics.

### THEIR HISTORY—

Remotely and spiritually the Shakers are related to the French "Comisards" and the Quakers. When an edict at Mantes was issued against the Comisards in 1685, a number of them fled to England.

James and Jane Wardly, English Quakers, joined the Comisards and brought with them Ann Lee, who later became the Mother of the Quakers. She was married to Abraham Stanley and had no formal education. She saw visions which instructed her to undertake the task of purifying mankind. From the Comisards she learned of the second coming of Christ in the form of "His Female Nature". It was the Wardleys who became first "aware" that Ann Lee, then twenty three years old, was "that" Female Nature of Christ. However, it took nine years (1758-1767) for this dreaming vision to become a reality. Ann Lee was imprisoned for "disturbing the peace," a charge leveled at any sectarian. While in prison, she had the "revelation" that she was the anointed successor to Jesus. Again it was the Wardleys who were the first to acknowledge her spiritual leadership. Continuous persecution by the English caused another "revelation" to take place, which directed Mother Ann Lee to depart for America where the "Millennial Church would be established." Mother Lee and eight of her followers left for the United States and settled near Albany, New York in 1774.

Nor did the American neighbors look with pleasure at the "queer" doings of the strangers who shook, sang and danced during their prayer meetings. However, the sect grew and spread. Aside their strange behavior during prayers, their life seemed faultless. They abstained from strong drink and smoking. Their property and earnings were shared communally. They were charitable and willing to give a helping hand to anyone (during the fire of 1829 which destroyed Troy, New York, the Shaker communities of Enfield and Canterbury, New Hampshire, sent the sufferers \$500.00 which was an enormous sum for those days), and their model life, acquired for them many adherents and new communities grew up through New York, New England, and as far as Ohio, and it reached



The Shakers at the Niskayuna, New York. Meeting house as it appeared in "Leslie's Popular Monthly, 1885."

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a peak of 4,000 (The Essenes, too at their zenith, reached the number of 4,000).

The growth of the Shakers was hampered for the very same reason as did that of the Essenes, celibacy. Since there were no births among them they had to recruit neophytes among the people "of the world," who were willing to sell their belongings and turn over the money to the common fund (Community Interest), to "Confess their Sins" and to lead a "Virgin Life", three required primaries. They reached their zenith in 1860.

### SHAKER DANCING

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The earliest dancing of the shakers was termed by them as "promiscuous", denoting of unorganized and individual patterns performed by whirling and leaping to no particular plan but as the spirit moved them—spontaneous.

The organized dancing came into being probably thanks to Mother Lucy who joined the sect at the age of 20 and when she was 28 she became the spiritual leader. Mother Lucy, who was the first American born woman to join the group, had an eye for choreographic order and the new phase of dancing was introduced.

I will follow-up with some excerpts on a shaker meeting as it appeared in Harpers Magazine in 1857.

"The hour for the commencement of worship was half past ten... The sexes being separated. At the appointed hour they all came in couples, stood a moment in silence, and then sat down, the men and women facing each other... the men were in their shirt sleeves. Their Sunday costumes of pantaloons of blue linen with a fine white stripe in it; vests of a much deeper blue and plain. ...The women wear on Sunday, some a pure white dress, and others a white dress with a delicate blue stripe in it. Over their necks and bosoms a pure white kerchief... Their heads were covered with lawn-caps..."

"The worshipers soon arose, and approached from opposite ends of the room, until the two front rows were within two yards of each other... There they stood in silence, in serried columns like platoons in military, while two rows of men and women stood along the wall facing the audience (consisting of Gentiles). From these came a grave personage, and standing in the center of the worshipers, addressed them with a few words of exhortation... They began to sing a hymn... to a lively tune, keeping time with their feet..."

"After two other brethren had given brief "testimonies," the worshipers all turned their backs to the audience, except those of the two wall rows, and commenced a backward and forward march, or dance, in a regular springing step, keeping time to the music of their voices... The wall rows alone kept time with their hands moving up and down, the palms turned upward..."



From "Harper's Magazine" of 1857 showing the Shakers dancing at their meeting house in Lebanon.

"The worshipers now stood in silence—few moments, when they commenced singing another hymn... Elder Evans then came forward, and in an able discourse of almost an hour, expounded the peculiar doctrine of the Shakers... When he had ceased all the worshipers... with graceful motions gradually changed their positions into circular form, all the while with springing steps in unison with a lively tune. In the center stood twenty-four singers, twelve men and twelve women; and around them in two concentric circles, marched and countermarched the remainder of the worshipers. ... a brief pause and they commenced another lively tune and march, all keeping time with their hands moving up and down, and occasionally clapping them three or four times in concert... When the hymn ceased... they all turned their faces toward the inner circle of singers."

"After another pause the worshipers commenced a hymn in slow and plaintive strain. The music was unlike anything I ever heard; beautiful, impressive, and deeply solemn. As it died away, the clear musical voice of a female was heard, telling in joyful cadence, how happy she felt as a member of that pure and holy community... Another sweet female voice commenced a hymn in which "Mother Ann" was celebrated. The entire body of worshipers formed a single line, marched slowly around the central circle of singers..."

"After a brief pause they commenced singing a lively spiritual song. The worshippers now formed four circles, with the singers as the central one, and held each other by the hand, the men and women separately. ...In this hymn they sang of Union, as exhibited by their linked hands; and when it had ceased they all lifted up their hands, and gave a subdued shout—the shout of victory—the final Victory of Christ..."

"Three of four more songs and hymns, with graceful dances or marches, and the ceremonials drew to a close..."

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### SHAKER HYMNS

At first their songs were mere syllables and repetitional phrases understood by no one, which represented the "speaking in tongues" of the Essenes. As songs finally emerged, these were called "solemn". The earliest songs were learned by rote. As communities increased the number of songs likewise increased. Because the songs were interchanged between the communities a way of notating them had to be found. In 1820, letters instead of notes were introduced for notation. Until 1852 the hymns were used in manuscript books. After that date they were printed.

The author of the Harper's Magazine account, relates regarding the Shaker hymns thus:

"Their songs and hymns breath a pure Christian spirit: